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[BOE] Correspondence re: The Erosion of Free Speech at Colchester Public Meetings

1 message

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Please ensure this correspondence is included in your next meeting's agenda packet. Thank you.
Dear Colchester Board Members -

I am deeply disappointed and frustrated by the blatant disregard for free speech displayed by Colchester's leadership. At last night's (3/19) Board of Finance meeting, I commended the board for upholding the First Amendment—the fundamental right of citizens to address their government without undue interference. Yet, almost immediately, the Board of Finance Chairman's actions made it clear that this principle is no longer respected in Colchester.

This is not an isolated incident. At a recent Board of Education meeting, I was silenced by the Chairman simply because she found my comment objectionable. Now, the Board of Finance Chairman has taken it even further, using her authority to control discourse and shield her allies on the Board of Education from answering a legitimate and necessary question—one that could expose a potential violation of federal law. Given that the Board of Education refuses to answer direct questions at their meetings or in writing, instead dismissing public input as mere "guidance" (whatever that means), the Board of Finance meeting was the only opportunity to demand accountability. And yet, the Chairman of the Board of Finance used her gavel to suppress it.

Even more disturbing is that this happened mere weeks after the Board of Finance itself agreed to uphold the principles of free speech and reject arbitrary restrictions on public comment. That commitment clearly meant nothing, as it was immediately abandoned the moment it became politically inconvenient.

As if that weren't enough, the Board of Finance Chairman then threatened to remove a duly elected Republican board member simply for objecting when another member was asked to explain the Board of Education budget for them. His objection was entirely justified—anyone requesting taxpayer funds should be able to clearly explain and justify their request, especially in a public meeting designed for that exact purpose. It was not his fault that they came to the meeting wholly unprepared. Yet, while he was reprimanded for doing his duty, no action was taken against a Democratic Board of Finance member who responded to him by saying, "F**k you," nor against a Board of Education member, and personal friend of the Board of Finance Chairman, who repeatedly heckled both the Republican board member and at least one citizen in attendance. The double standard is undeniable.

What has Colchester come to when its leaders so openly disregard the First Amendment? I have lived here through many administrations, and never before have I seen such blatant efforts to control public discourse. Past leaders—regardless of party—respected the public's right to speak, even when it was inconvenient. Yet now, as election season begins and many board members seek re-election, free speech is suddenly under attack. First, the Board of Education. Now, the Board of Finance. Will the Board of Selectmen be next to silence public discourse on any topic they find politically inconvenient?

The right of citizens to address their government without arbitrary restrictions is not an inconvenient privilege—it is a cornerstone of the American republic. Public meetings exist so that public officials can be held accountable, hear directly from the people they serve, and make informed decisions based on public concerns. When those in power begin deciding which voices are allowed to be heard and which must be silenced, democracy itself is at risk.

No board, no chairman, no elected official has the right to dictate which issues may be discussed and which must be suppressed. A government that selectively enforces rules based on political convenience or personal alliances is not serving its people—it is serving itself. If this pattern continues, where does it end? Are we now expected to accept that public officials will only tolerate speech they agree with? That board members can dismiss concerns they don't want to address? That citizens will be silenced when they challenge those in power?

The shift toward restricting speech in Colchester is not only a drastic break from precedent—it sets a dangerous new one. The fact that these actions coincide with election season raises serious concerns. Is this crackdown meant to stifle opposition and control public perception before votes are cast? If so, that is not only unethical—it is an outright attack on the democratic process.

This is not just about one meeting, one board, or one rule—it is about the direction you, as Colchester's leaders, are taking this town. Will you continue down a path where a select few control who gets to speak and what can be said? Or will you uphold the fundamental right of citizens to be heard, to question their government, and to expect accountability from those elected to serve them? The choice is yours, but the people of Colchester are paying attention.
Respectfully, Jason LaChapelle